

The Brethren

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(Continued from Last Week)

"Wine! It is nectar!" said Wulf. "Aye," put in the chaplain Matthew, "I might have drunk this in the 'den,' while from the lower table the joyful shouts of praise of this both, creamlike vintage.

"Certainly that wine was both rich and strong. Thus, after his sup of it, he, as it were, seemed to fall on the floor of Sir Andrew and to cover it with his body again, and, lo, his brain full of memories and foresights. He passed, and he grew suddenly old. Yet what had he to fear that night? The gates across the moat were locked and guarded. Trusty men, more or more of them, ate in his out-buildings within those gates, while others still more trusted, sat in his hall. On his right hand and on his left were those two strong and valiant knights, Sir Godwin and Sir Wulf. Suddenly he heard a voice speak. It was Rosamund's, and she said:

"Why is there such silence, father? While ago I heard the servants and handmen carousing in the barn; now they are still as death. Oh, and look! They are all here drunken? Godwin?" "But as she spoke Godwin's head fell forward on the board, while Wulf rose, drew his sword, then threw his arm about the neck of the priest and took with him to the ground. As it was with these so it seemed with all. Folk rocked to and fro, then sank to sleep, every one of them save the merchant Georgios, who rose to call other toasts.

"Stranger," said Sir Andrew in a low voice, "your wine is very strong." "It would seem so, Sir Knight," he answered, "but I will wake them from their wassail." Drawing a silver whistle from his robe he blew it long and loud. "What," he laughed, "do they all sleep? Why, then, I must give them a toast that will rouse them all," and seizing a horn mug he waved it and shouted:

"Arouse you, ye drunkards, and drink the Lady Rose of the World, princess Bealbec and niece of my royal master, Yusuf Salah-ed-din, who sends me to lead her to him!"

As the words passed his lips there came a sound of running feet, and through the open door at the far end of the hall burst in a score or over of armed men. Then at last Sir Andrew saw and understood.

With a roar of rage like that of a wounded lion he seized his daughter and dragged her back with him down the passage into the solar, where a fire burned and lights had been lit ready for their retiring, flinging to and fro the door behind them.

"Swift!" he said, as he tore his gown from him. "There is no escape, but at least I can die fighting for you. Give me my mail."

She snatched his hauberk from the wall, and while they thundered at the door did it on to him—aye, and his steel helmet also and gave him his long sword and his shield.

"Now," he said, "help me." And they must the oak table forward and over it in front of the door, throwing the chairs and stools on either side, that men might stumble on them.

"There is a bow," he said, "and you use it as I have taught you. Get on one side and out of reach of the sword sweeps and shoot past me as they rush. It may stay one of them. But Godwin and Wulf were here, and we would still teach these Paynim a lesson!"

Rosamund looked round. Against the wall stood a little desk, at which Godwin was wont to write, and on it lay pen and parchment. She seized them and as the door gave slowly inward crawled:

"Follow me to Saladin. In that hope I live on."

Then as the stout door at length crashed in Rosamund turned what she had written face downward on the floor and, seizing the bow, set an arrow to its string. Now it was down, and on rushed the mob up the six feet of narrow passage. At the end of it, in front of the overturned table, they halted suddenly, for there before them, a skull emblazoned, shield on arm, his long sword lifted and a terrible wrath burning in his eyes, stood the old knight like a wolf at bay and by his side, bow in hand, the beautiful lady Rosamund, clad in all her festal broderies.

"Yield you!" cried a voice. By way of answer the bowstring twanged, and an arrow sped home to its feathers through the throat of the speaker, so that he went down, grabbing at it, and spoke no more forever.

As he fell clattering to the floor Sir Andrew cried in a great voice:

"We yield not to pagan dogs and poisoners! A D'Arcy! A D'Arcy! Meet D'Arcy, meet death!"

Thus for the last time did old Sir

Andrew utter the warcy of his race, which he had feared would never pass his lips again. His prayer had been heard, and he was to die as he had desired.

"Down with him; seize the princess!" said a voice. It was that of Georgios, no longer humble with a merchant's obsequious whine, but speaking in tones of cold command and in Arabic.

For a moment the swarthy mob hung back, as well they might in face of that glittering sword. Then with a cry of "Salah-ed-din! Salah-ed-din!" they surged, with flashing spears and scimiters. The overturned table was in front of them, and one leaped upon its edge, but as he leaped the old knight, all his years and sickness forgotten now, sprang forward and struck downward so heavy a blow that in the darkling mouth of the passage the sparks streamed out and where the Saracen's head had been appeared his heels. Back Sir Andrew stepped again to win space for his sword play, while round the ends of the table broke two fierce faced men. At one of them Rosamund shot with her bow, and the arrow pierced his thigh, but as he fell he struck with his keen scimiter and shored the end off the bow, so that it was useless. The second man caught his foot in the bar of the oak chair, which he did not see, and went down prone, while Sir Andrew, taking no heed of him, rushed with a shout at the crowd who followed and, catching their blows upon his shield, rained down others so desperate that, being hampered by their very number, they gave before him and staggered back along the passage.

"Guard your right, father!" cried Rosamund. He sprang round to see the Saracen who had fallen on his feet again. At him he went, nor did the man wait the onset, but turned to fly, only to find his death, for the great sword caught him between neck and shoulders. Now a voice cried:

"We make poor sport with this old lion, and lose men. Keep clear of his claws and whelm him with spear casts."

But Rosamund, who understood their tongue, sprang in front of him and answered in Arabic:

"Aye, through my breast, and go tell that tale to Saladin!"

Then, clear and calm, was heard the command of Georgios. "He who harms a hair of the princess dies. Take them both living if you may, but lay no hand on her. Stay, let us talk."

Rosamund touched her father and pointed to the man who lay upon the floor with an arrow through his thigh. He was struggling to his knee, raising the heavy scimiter in his hand. Sir Andrew lifted his sword as a husband-man lifts a stick to kill a rat, then let it fall again, saying:

"I fight not with the wounded. Drop that steel and get you back to your own folk."

The fellow obeyed him—yes, and even touched the floor with his forehead in salaam as he crawled away, for he knew that he had been given his life and that the deed was noble toward him who had planned a coward's stroke. Then Georgios stepped forward, no longer the same Georgios who had sold poisoned wine and eastern broderies, but a proud looking, high browed Saracen clad in the mail which he wore beneath his merchant's robe, and in place of the crucifix wearing on his breast a great star shaped jewel, the emblem of his house and rank.

"Sir Andrew," he said, "bearken to me, I pray you. Noble was that act," and he pointed to the wounded man being dragged away by his fellows. "and noble has been your defense, well worthy of your lineage and your knight-hood. It is a tale that my master," and he bowed as he said the word, "will love to hear if it pleases Allah that we return to him in safety. Also you will think that I have played a knave's trick upon you, overcoming the might of those gallant knights, Sir Godwin and Sir Wulf, not with sword blows, but with drugged wine, and treating all your servants in like fashion, since not one of them can shake off its fumes before tomorrow's light. So, indeed, it is a very scurvy trick, which I shall remember with shame to my life's end. Yet bethink you how we stand, and forgive us. We are but a little company of men in your great country, hidden, as it were, in a den of lions, who, if they saw us, would slay us without mercy. That, indeed, is a small thing, for what are our lives, of which your sword has taken tithe, and not only yours, but those of the twin brethren on the quay by the water?"

"I thought it," broke in Sir Andrew contemptuously. "Indeed, that deed was worthy of you—twenty or more men against two."

Georgios held up his hand. "Judge us not harshly," he said, speaking slowly, who for his own ends wished to gain time, "you who have read the letter of our lord. The letter failed, for neither you nor the princess"—and he bowed to Rosamund—"could be bought. More, the whole country was awakened; you were surrounded with armed men; the knightly brethren kept watch and ward over you. Therefore, because I must I, who am a prince and an emir, became a dealer in drugged wine."

"Now bearken. Yield you, Sir Andrew, who have done enough to make

your name a song for generations, and accept the love of Salah-ed-din, whose word you have, the word that, as you know well, cannot be broken, which I, the lord El-Hassan—for no meaner man has been sent upon this errand—plight to you afresh. Yield you and save your life and live on in honor."

"For know, this deed must be done. Did we return without the princess Rose of the World we should die, every one of us, and did we offer her harm or insult, then more horribly than I can tell you. This is no fancy of a great king that drives him on to the stealing of a woman, although she be of his own high blood. The voice of God has spoken to Salah-ed-din by the mouth of his angel Sleep. Thrice has Allah spoken in dreams, telling him who is merciful that through your daughter and her nobleness alone can countless lives be saved. Therefore, sooner than she should escape him, he would lose even the half of all his empire. Outwit us, defeat us now, capture us, cause us to be tortured and destroyed, and other messengers would come to do his bidding—indeed, they are already on the way. Moreover, it is useless to shed more blood, seeing it is written in the books that this lady, Rose of the World, must return to the east, where she was begot, there to fulfill her destiny and save the lives of men. Sir Andrew, the time grows short, and I must fulfill my mission. Will you take the peace of Salah-ed-din or force his servants to take your life?"

The old knight listened, resting on his reddened sword; then he lifted his head and spoke:

"I am aged and near my death, Wine Seller Georgios, or Prince El-Hassan, whichever you may be. In my youth I swore to make no pact with Paynims, and in my old I will not break that vow."

"Then, princess," answered El-Hassan, "bear me witness throughout the east that I am innocent of your father's blood. On his own head be it, and on yours," and for the second time he blew upon his whistle.

CHAPTER VII.

THERE was a crash among the wooden shutters of the window behind them, and down into the room leaped a long, lithe figure, holding an ax aloft. Before Sir Andrew could turn to see whence the sound came that ax dealt him a fearful blow between the shoulders which, although the ringed mail remained unshorn, shattered his spine beneath. Down he fell, rolled on to his back and lay there, still able to speak and without pain, but helpless as a child, for he was paralyzed, and nevermore would move hand or foot or head.

In the silence that followed he spoke in a heavy voice, letting his eyes rest upon the man who had struck him down.

"A knightly blow, truly; one worthy of a Christian born who does murder for Paynim pay! Traitor to God and man, who have eaten my bread and now slaughter me like an ox on my hearthstone, may your own end be even worse, and at the hands of those you serve."

The palmer Nicholas, for it was he, although he no longer wore the palmer's robe, slunk away muttering and was lost among the crowd in the passage. Then, with a sudden and a bitter cry, Rosamund swooped forward, as a bird swoops, snatched up the sword her sire would never lift again and, setting its hilt upon the floor, cast herself forward, but its point never touched her breast, for the emir sprang swiftly and struck the steel aside; then, as she fell, caught her in his arms.

"Lady," he said, loosening her very gently. "Allah does not need you yet. I have told you that it is not fated. Now will you pass me your word, for, being of the blood of Salah-ed-din and D'Arcy, you, too, cannot lie, that neither now nor afterward you will attempt to harm yourself? If not, I must bind you, which I am loath to do. It is a sacrifice to which I pray you will not force me."

"Promise, Rosamund," said the hollow voice of her father, "and go to fulfill your fate. Self murder is a crime, and the man is right. It is decreed. I bid you promise."

"I obey and promise," said Rosamund. "It is your hour, my lord Hassan."

He bowed deeply and answered: "I am satisfied and henceforth we are your servants. Princess, the night air is bitter. You cannot travel thus. In which chamber are your garments?"

She pointed with her finger. A man took a taper and, accompanied by two others, entered the place to return presently with their arms full of all the apparel they could find.

"Princess," said Hassan, bowing, "my master, your uncle, sent you certain jewels of no mean value. Is it your wish that they should accompany you?"

Without lifting her eyes from her dying father's face Rosamund answered heavily:

"Where they are, there let them bide. What have I to do with jewels?"

"Your will is my law," he said, "and others will be found for you. Princess, all is ready. We wait your pleasure."

"My pleasure? O God, my pleasure?" exclaimed Rosamund in the same drear voice, still staring at her father,

who lay before her on the ground. "I cannot help it," said Hassan, answering the question in her eyes, and there was grief in his tone. "He would not come; he brought it on himself, though in truth I wish that accursed Frank had not struck so shrewdly. If you ask it, we will bear him with you; but, lady, it is idle to hide the truth. He is sped. I have studied medicine, and I know."

"Nay," said Sir Andrew from the floor. "Leave me here. Daughter, we must part awhile. As I stole his child from Ayoub, so Ayoub's son steals my child from me. Daughter, cling to the faith—that we may meet again."

"To the death," she answered. "Be comforted," said Hassan. "Has not Salah-ed-din passed his word that, except her own will or that of Allah should change her heart, a cross worshiper she may live and die? Lady, for your own sake as well as ours let this sad farewell be brief. Begone, my servants, taking these dead and wounded with you. There are things it is not fitting that common eyes should see."

They obeyed, and the three of them remained alone together. Then Rosamund knelt down beside her father, and they whispered into each other's ears. It would seem that they found some kind of hope and consolation, at least when Rosamund kissed him for the last time Sir Andrew smiled and said:

"Yes, yes. It may all be for the best. God will guard you, and his will be done. But I forgot. Tell me, daughter, which?"

Again she whispered into his ear, and when he had thought a moment he answered:

"Maybe you are right. I think that is wisest for all. And now on the three of you—aye, and on your children's children's children—let my blessing rest, as rest it shall."

Then his eyes fixed themselves upon his daughter's face with one long, searching look and closed.

"I think that he is dead," said Hassan. "May God be merciful and compassionate, rest his soul!" And taking a white garment from the wall he flung it over him, adding, "Lady, come."

Thrice Rosamund looked at the shrouded figure on the floor. Once she wrung her hands and seemed about to fall. Then, as though a thought struck her, she lifted her father's sword from where it lay and, gathering her strength, drew herself up and passed like a queen down the blood stained passage and the steps of the solar. In the hall beneath waited the band of Hassan, who bowed as she came—vision of despairing loveliness that held aloft a red and naked sword. There too, lay the drugged men fallen this way and that and among them Wulf across the table and Godwin on the dais. Rosamund spoke:

"Are these dead or sleeping?" "Have no fear," answered Hassan. "By my hope of paradise they do but sleep and will awake ere morning."

"I would leave a token to my knights," she said. Then, while they watched her with wondering eyes, she unfastened the



A vision of despairing loveliness.

gold cross and chain that hung upon her bosom and, slipping the cross from the chain, went to where Godwin lay and placed it on his breast. Next, with a swift movement, she wound the chain about the silver hilt of Sir Andrew's sword and, passing to Wulf, with one strong thrust drove the point between the oak boards of the table, so that it stood before him.

Then taking the hand of Hassan, who stood searching her white, inscrutable face, with never a word or a backward look, she swept down the length of the long hall and out into the night beyond.

Wulf was dreaming, dreaming that he stood on his head upon a wooden plank, as once he had seen a juggler do. Then he awoke to hear a voice shouting—the voice of Matthew, the chaplain of Steeple church.

"Awake!" said the voice. "In God's name, I conjure you, awake!"

"What is it?" he said, lifting his head sleepily and becoming conscious of a dull pain across his forehead.



By way of answer the bowstring twanged.

"It is that death and the devil have been here, Sir Wulf." "Well, they are often near together. But I thirst. Give me water."

A serving woman, pallid, disheveled, heavy eyed, who was stumbling to and fro, lighting torches and tapers, for it was still dark, brought it to him in a leathern jack, from which he drank deeply.

"That is better," he said. Then his eye fell upon the bloody sword set point downward in the wood of the table before him, and he exclaimed: "Mother of God, what is that? My uncle's silver hilted sword, red with blood, and Rosamund's gold chain upon the hilt! Priest, where is the Lady Rosamund?"

"Gone," answered the chaplain in a voice that sounded like a groan. "The women woke and found her gone, and Sir Andrew lies dead or dying in the solar, but now I have shriven him, and oh, we have all been drugged!"

Wulf sprang to his feet with an oath. "Ah, I have it now! You mean the Cyprian chapman Georgios, he who sold wine."

"He who sold drugged wine," echoed the chaplain, and has stolen away the Lady Rosamund."

Then Wulf seemed to go mad. Presently he shouted in a voice of thunder:

"Awake, ye drunkards! Awake, and learn what has chanced to us! Your Lady Rosamund has been raped away while we were lost in sleep!"

At the sound of that great voice a tall form arose from the floor and staggered toward him, holding a gold cross in its hand.

"What awful words are those, my brother?" asked Godwin, who, pale and dull eyed, rocked to and fro before him. "Where is Rosamund?"

"Gone, gone, gone!" cried Wulf. "Tell him, priest."

So the chaplain told him all he knew.

"Thus have we kept our oaths," went on Wulf. "Oh, what can we do now save die for very shame? What said you of my uncle, priest? Dead or only dying? Nay, answer not, let us see. Come, brother."

Now together they ran or, rather, reeled, torch in hand, along the passage. Before them beneath the white, shroud-like cloak lay Sir Andrew, the steel helm on his head and his face beneath it even whiter than the cloak. At the sound of their footsteps he opened his eyes.

"At length, at length," he muttered. "Oh, how many years have I waited for you! Nay, be silent, for I do not know how long my strength will last. But listen—kneel down and listen."

So they knelt on either side of him, and in quick, fierce words he told them all.

"Take horse swiftly," he gasped, pausing now and again to rest, "and rouse the countryside. There is still a chance. Nay, seven hours have gone by. There is no chance. Their plans were too well laid. By now they will be at sea. So hear me. Go to Palestine. There is money for your faring in my chest, but go alone, with no company, for in time of peace these would betray you. Godwin, draw off this ring from my finger, and with it as a token find out Jebal, the black sheik of the mountain tribe at Masayaf, on Lebanon. Bid him remember the vow he made to Andrew D'Arcy, the English knight. If any can aid you, it will be Jebal, who hates the houses of Nur-ed-din and of Ayoub. So, I charge you, let nothing—I say nothing—turn you aside from seeking him."

For a moment the dying man was silent, until his face lit up as with a great gladness, and he cried in a loud, clear voice: "Beloved wife, I hear you! O God, I come!"

Then, though his eyes stayed open and the smile still rested on his face, his jaw fell.

(To Be Continued)

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